

Finding their voices

Program for young writers honors Martin Luther King Jr.

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Inspiration struck Berkeley High School senior Gabe Crane four years ago, at a poetry slam. He was no stranger to standing before an audience -- he had experience in drama and songwriting, so the transition to spoken word seemed natural. Months after his first spoken-word performance, Crane was competing in Ann Arbor, Mich., on a national slam poetry team and began attending writing workshops.

"I felt a spark and said, 'This is something I can do,' " he recalled. That spark led to a dazzling career in the arts, and over the next four years, Crane accomplished what many people only dream about doing in a lifetime.

He has performed in national poetry slam competitions and produced his own one-act play, "Thoughts for a Lonely Supermarket," that was produced by Berkeley Repertory Theater.

Now, the 17-year-old has written his first book, also titled "Thoughts for a Lonely Supermarket," published by First Word Press. The forthcoming book is a compilation of short stories, poetry and one-act plays. It is part of a new venture from Youth Speaks Inc. of San Francisco that gives young writers the opportunity to write and publish their first manuscripts.

"Thoughts" and books by two other Bay Area teens, Ayoka Yejide, 18, of Oakland, and Stephen Pickens, 19, of San Francisco will be available at an event celebrating the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. -- "Bringing the Noise for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." -- on Monday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

A central theme in Crane's work is the lack of community in 21st century America. The play is set in a vast Andronico's supermarket where, he says, "People just want to be left alone."

It is a series of monologues portraying five shoppers of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds. The play examines their thoughts as they look through the store and encounter other customers, ruminating on subjects such as baseball, war, religion, what it means to be a person of privilege, and the importance of high school.

"The themes that come out in the play all tie into themes that resonate throughout the poems in the book," he said.

In the following excerpt, Laila is a high school student reflecting on an anti-war rally she has just attended.

"I felt manipulated at that rally. Like I was just padding their statistics, and what's even worse: It was something I didn't even want to be associated with. I opened my mouth and told the world to free Palestine because they told me to. It came out so easily, like it was the name of a band or a country. First off, they shouldn't be leading those sorts of chants at an anti-war protest, but really, I didn't have to chant. I really didn't. It just sounded so right, and so liberal, and so me. But I didn't stop to think what I was really saying."

Crane credits Youth Speaks, a nonprofit organization that hosts free education-development programs and spoken-word performances, for helping him develop his literary skills.

"(Crain, Yejide and Pickens) are among the best of the young writers who have participated in Youth Speaks' mentoring programs, after-school workshops, open mikes and poetry slams," Program Director Paul Flores said.

Each performer is teamed with a staff person who acts as their mentor for six months to help them develop their work, said Youth Speaks Executive Director James Kass.

"The writers represent different styles as varied as their personalities and cultural backgrounds," Flores said. "The one thing these poets all have in common is the honesty with which they present their insights and feelings."

Crane went after school to Youth Speaks' Mission District offices in San Francisco where he would work on his material. At first, he wrote mainly performance-oriented poetry. The dialogue was rhythmic and fast, with a lot of repetition and word play, covering issues such as the war in Iraq. But, he says, "It wouldn't necessarily read well because a lot of it is in the delivery."

After he started working one-on-one with Kass, Crane noticed a change. "He brought my writing full-circle. I found my voice in the poetry."

Finding his voice allowed him to broaden his horizons.

"From that point on, my writing got infinitely better," Crane said. "I began to write poems, plays, dialogues and short stories to be read."

Around the same time, Youth Speaks was developing First Word Press. In its inaugural year, the program has published six books for young writers. Crane was the first.

"Gabe had been in my workshop for a couple of years, and he was someone who could really compile a manuscript," Kass said.

Even with all the extracurricular activities, Crane has maintained an "A" average in school.

"There's only 24 hours in a day, and I have had to make some decisions about what I can and cannot do. I've been able to do everything for school, but it has been a lot of work."

He plans to attend college on the East Coast and has applied for early admission to Yale.

"When I grow up, I want to be a playwright and produce my own plays," he said.

Yejide has been working with Youth Speaks since 1999, when she attended an after-school workshop at Berkeley High School after encouragement from a cousin.

There she found "a group of people who were sincerely interested in the practice of creativity," she said. "It was a place where we grew. It involved the work of meeting, learning, loving, forgiving, challenging and risking yourself. My high school curriculum never asked those things of me."

Yejide is studying English and African American Studies at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. "I'm thinking about getting my Ph.D. after I graduate, or getting credentialed and teaching English or creative writing and dance in high school or junior high," she said. She also wants to start a nonprofit that works with people of color on developing their writing and publishing their work.

"Writing has been a part of my life since I was 5, but Youth Speaks caused me to see and understand that writing was the path toward everything I would ever look for," she said. Her book, "I Don't Owe You Anything," is a collection of poems about the transition from childhood to womanhood.

"It is about me, my experience and my perspective," she said. "Some of my pieces are really selfish and unapologetic. This book hurt me to write, because I had to be truthful in a very intimate way. But these are things I feel like I need to say." The following is an excerpt from the poem "God Decides":

2. This was my first piece of short fiction

I let the wrong people take advantage of me,

and poetry is what happened

3. A co-worker told me that I write about sex

Another told me I write about the consequences

Someone else told me I write about the aftermath

They are all wrong

I write when my feelings get hurt. Period.

Pickens, 19, has been volunteering with Youth Speaks for the past two years and is a member of S.P.O.K.E.S., the organization's youth advisory board. As an outreach coordinator, he leads a team of 10 people in organizing events and open mike performances and in finding performers for the slams. He is also employed by the San Francisco Conservation Corps, a nonprofit job and academic training organization for youth ages 11-26. With the Corps he performs environmental conservation and community projects throughout San Francisco.

"I started writing poems when I was 16 years old," said Pickens, who lives in Potrero Hill. His book, "Both Sides," deals with Yejide's perspectives as an African American growing up in San Francisco's rough urban neighborhoods.

"They (Youth Speaks) approached me about the book, and I thought 'when opportunity knocks...' so I took it." The title comes from the old saying "the grass is always greener on the other side."

"I've seen both sides of the grass, both sides of the field through my eyes," he said, "the good parts and the bad."

The following is an excerpt from Pickens' poem "2 the Unknown :"

P.S. This memoir is for u as an old man to remember what was motivating

u at this particular time of your life, so if you turn out to be nothing, its all

on u, and u cant blame no one but yourself. Letter from a youngsta to an old

man who hasn't come about yet, this a tale to a shadow.

Books and King event

-- The books by First Word Press -- Gabe Crane's "Thoughts For a Lonely Supermarket," Ayoka Yeji's "I Don't Owe You Anything," and Stephen Pickens' "Both Sides" -- sell for \$7.95 apiece. Books will be available at City Lights, Modern Times, at Youth Speaks events and through www.youthspeaks.org.

-- Bringing the Noise for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will be at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Mission and Third streets, San Francisco. \$10, \$4 for seniors and students under 20. For more information, visit www.youthspeaks.org. For tickets, contact the Yerba Buena Center box office at (415) 978-2787 or visit www.yerbabuenaarts.org.

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